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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000993

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: OBASANJO REPLACES SERVICE CHIEFS

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR HOWARD F. JETER. REASON 1.5 (D).

Refs: (A) USDAO Abuja 874 (B) USDAO Abuja 877
- (C) USDAO Lagos (D) OFR Difficulties Cable

1. (U) President Obasanjo on April 24 abruptly retired Chief of Army Staff LTG Victor Malu, Chief of Naval Staff VADM V.K. Ombu and Chief of Air Staff, AVM Isaac Alfa. MG A.O. Ogomudia will replace Malu, and RADM S.I. Afolayan and AVM J.D. Wuyep will replace, respectively, Ombu and Alfa.

2. (C) Reftels provide background on the reasons for the dismissals, as well as biographic information. The GON is offering different reasons for the changes to different audiences. The first public message was that the three men voluntarily and simultaneously retired. The second public message was that President Obasanjo had always planned a "mid-term" change of Service Chiefs (the traditional term of office has been four years; Malu, Ombu and Alfa became Service Chiefs shortly after Obasanjo took office in May 1999). Indeed, there was talk of changes in January.

3. (C) The private message to diplomats focuses on Administration unhappiness with Malu's public opposition to its policies and suggests that Ombu and Alfa lost their jobs simultaneously largely in order to make Malu's forced retirement look somehow routine. Clearly, none of the affected Service Chiefs was expecting the ax to fall when it did. Toeing the public line in a phone call to the Ambassador, LTC M.I. Idris, military assistant to NSA Aliyu Mohammed, said the retirements were "normal" and that no "backlash" was expected from the Nigerian military. He said that the decision to remove Malu was unrelated to the former COAS's well-publicized complaints about Operation Focus Relief. Idris admitted, however, that Malu's recent statements to the press (ref D) had influenced the timing of the dismissals.

4. (C) However, Idris also told the Ambassador that Malu and his colleagues had created "other problems" of which the USG had not been made aware. Reporting in other channels tends to confirm that Alfa and Ombu had their own problems with senior Administration civilians.

5. (C) Reaction to the forced retirements has been mixed. For many, the key question is whether the previous regional and ethnic balance was maintained. In that sense, there has been a marked shift toward the Southwest. The Chief of Army Staff (COAS) position, by far the most important, has slipped from Northern hands for the first time in over 20 years, going to an officer (Ogomudia) who is from Southern Edo State, an area with kinship ties to the Yoruba. Officially, however, Edo is part of the South-South "geopolitical" region, so Ogomudia's elevation gives this region a replacement for Ombu, who we believe may be from a northern Bayelsa State minority with kinship ties to the Igbo. News media report that Afolayan is from the North-Central region. His name has a Yoruba ring to it, so we think he is probably from Kwara State. Wuyep is a Christian from Plateau State. His elevation is a more-or-less even trade for the removal of Alfa, who is from Plateau State, also in the North-Central region.

6. (C) Thus, the Obasanjo Administration has formally maintained the existing regional balance: Two Chiefs from the North-Central region (Wuyep and Afolayan) and one from the South-South (Ogomudia). However, two of the new Chiefs will be assumed (at least in the North) to be allied with Yoruba interests, where before none was seen as ethnically close to the Yoruba. Moreover, one of those two Chiefs is the one who really matters -- the COAS.

7. (C) Northerners, predictably, have reacted negatively to the loss of what has traditionally been the top military job. Northern Senators claimed in press interviews the day the retirements were announced that the move was a

"vendetta" against the North, and could be potentially destabilizing--a code word that it violated what the North views as the proper "zoning" of the position. They also alluded to the possibility that the change was instigated by the U.S., whose participation in Nigerian military matters Malu opposed. While this rhetoric is somewhat hyperbolic, it does reflect anger in the North that two years into a democratic administration it has lost the position from which it ruled the country for the better part of the past twenty years. Some Northern members of the House of Representatives have indicated plans to convoke Defense Minister Danjuma to explain the dismissals, as well as the presence of American troops, who they claimed to have been in Nigeria for over six months. (Note: All troops left before the end of 2000. End Note.)

18. (C) It is also believed in some circles that Malu's removal may have been precipitated in part because of his growing popularity with vocal Northern critics of the GON. Malu's complaints about U.S.-Nigerian military relations had struck a resonant chord in certain Northern circles where the memories of the Abacha years are not unpleasant. Malu had made a point to assert the moral correctness of his service under and loyalty to the Abacha regime when he appeared before the Oputa Panel. Some observers believe that Malu's increasing popularity in the North may have emboldened him to take actions that bordered on (perhaps even crossed the line into) insubordination, forcing the President to remove him. Regardless of the role this may have played in the decision to remove Malu, his replacement with a Southerner (viewed by many Northerners as Yoruba) does appear intended to send a message to Northern elites, particularly those advocating for Ibrahim Babangida to run for the Presidency in 2003.

19. (U) Comment: We had anticipated that Nigerian news media, always eager to see a foreign conspiracy in the national closet, would have quickly picked up on the Northern senators' hints that the U.S. instigated the Chiefs' removals. We had a categorical denial ready for use when the need arose. While a few articles have implicitly alluded to this theory, no allegation has been so blatant that we have had to issue a denial on something that is probably a domestic, Nigerian move. End Comment.
Jeter